

Mobile Phones and the Breakdown of Face-to-face Communication: Kierkegaard's Call to *Friluftsliv*

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I address the negative side effects on face-to-face communication and well-being resulting from our continual use of mobile-mediated technology (MMT).¹ I consider these consequences by drawing on Søren Kierkegaard's deductions on deficient communication, and discuss one remedy he suggests: a closer relationship with nature. However, technology is so ubiquitous in the modern age that the prospect of escaping it, is nearly futile. In response, I offer a solution from the ideology of *friluftsliv*, which views a regular relationship with nature as a way of getting in touch with one's natural human identity and restoring balance in life.² I draw parallels between *friluftsliv* and Kierkegaard's ideas on nature and walking for curative purposes. I argue that the answer to our problem is not to shun technology, but to experience a regular relationship with nature as a way of offsetting its harmful effects.³

Introduction

Everywhere we go, we see many people with their heads down, focusing on their mobile phones. Some refer to these individuals as being in a state of "absent presence," meaning that one

¹ Mobile-mediated technology refers to cellular phones, more specifically smart phones and the number of methods of mediated communication that go along with them such as voice calls, text messaging (SMS), Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and so forth. For the purposes of space, mobile-mediated technology will be abbreviated as MMT.

² 56-57. Nils Faarlund, "Defining Friluftsliv," in *Nature First: outdoor life the Friluftsliv way*, eds. Bob Henderson and Nils Vikander, 56-61 (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2007).

³ To avoid any confusion, it should be noted that Søren Kierkegaard lived before the advent of Norway's *friluftsliv* movement and thus was unaware of it. For the purposes of this paper, I am merely drawing parallels between some of Kierkegaard's ideas and *friluftsliv*.

is "physically and perceptually present but immersed in a technologically mediated world of elsewhere."⁴ When split between the physical and mediated world, we miss details. In one example, passengers on a San Francisco light rail were so preoccupied with their phones that they did not notice a man pointing and waving his gun until he fired it.⁵ Our mobile phones have made us "pausable," and nowhere is this more apparent than in our day to day interactions with one another.⁶ We consider it normal to interrupt face-to-face conversation to respond to a text message or answer a phone call. This continual interruption results in less meaningful connections and research shows that merely being in the presence of a mobile phone distracts from face-to-face communication.⁷

This constant immersion in MMT drastically influences how we view our relationships with one another. It fosters a move toward horizontal relationships, or superficial and shallow relationships which take up less of our time and require less attention and commitment.⁸ Although these relationships are ready at hand, they come at a sacrifice; we start to see people as objects.⁹ Horizontal relationships inevitably take precedent over vertical relationships which require commitment, vulnerability and effort.¹⁰

However, it is our lack of alone time, separated from mediated connections and potential mediated connections, that I argue is most detrimental to our face-to-face communication.

⁴ Shalini Misra, Lulu Cheng, Jamie Genevie and Miao Yuan. "The iPhone Effect: The Quality of In-Person Social Interactions in the Presence of Mobile Devices." *Environment and Behavior* (2014): 5, <http://eab.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/05/31/0013916514539755.full.pdf>

⁵ Lydia O'Connor, "San Francisco Train Passengers Too Distracted By Phones To Notice Shooter's Gun In Plain Sight," *The Huffington Post*, October 8, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/08/san-francisco-train-shooting_n_4066930.html. mentioned in The iPhone Effect, 2.

⁶ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 161.

⁷ The iPhone Effect, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Turkle, 168.

¹⁰ The iPhone Effect, 6.

Humans have traditionally set boundaries between different aspects of their lives which have been shattered by the presence of mobile technology.¹¹ Sherry Turkle states: "we are too quick to celebrate the continual presence of a technology that knows no respect for traditional and helpful lines in the sand." When our mobile phones are always close at hand, we never have time to step back from our communication and we become overwhelmed. We are always available, a call or text away. I will now address how we may solve this dilemma.

Kierkegaard's Critique of Deficient Communication in Relation to MMT

In *The Present Age*, Søren Kierkegaard criticizes the press for similar reasons that we worry about MMT. In referring to society's fixation with meaningless information, he writes: "nothing happens but still there is instant publication."¹² He refers to the modern age as an age of reflection, which for him means that it is preoccupied with objective or superficial thoughts and lacks passion. "Reflection," he states, "like knowledge, increases sorrow."¹³ I will discuss in the next paragraphs exactly what he means by knowledge in relation to communication and reflection in relation to sorrow and despair.

Kierkegaard's critique of deficient communication draws strong parallels with mediated technology's influence favoring horizontal versus vertical relationships. In discussing education, he draws a distinction between two modes of communication; "communication of knowledge"

¹¹ Turkle, 160.

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, XIV: Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and The Present Age: A Literary Review*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 70.

¹³ *Two Ages*, 77.

and “communication of capability.”¹⁴ For Kierkegaard, communication of knowledge refers to a condition in which one is occupied solely with communicating without considering what it means to communicate. Communication of capability requires considering the communication itself in addition to those giving and receiving the communication.¹⁵ In effect, when we are communicating merely knowledge, both speaker and receiver become objects giving and receiving information. Embracing the communication of knowledge and in turn horizontal relationships leads directly to the reflection and lack of commitment that Kierkegaard warns leads those living within the aesthetic sphere to a life of despair.¹⁶

MMT encourages the communication of knowledge by eliminating distance and solitude between our connections. Discussing what he saw as the cheapness of society, Henry David Thoreau writes that we are randomly in contact too often and thus unable to find value in each other.¹⁷ “Chatter,” says Kierkegaard, “is the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking. Only the person who can remain essentially silent can speak essentially, can act essentially.”¹⁸ Translated to today's world, we cannot fully consider our real world connections when we are constantly connected to mobile media. We need a time of solitude and consideration between our communications. Kierkegaard would no doubt support

¹⁴ See Prosser, Brian T., and Andrew Ward. “Kierkegaard and the internet: Existential reflections on education and community.” *Ethics and Information Technology* 2, no. 3 (2000): 167-180. Prosser and Ward discuss at length Kierkegaard’s ideas on communication and education in relation to the rise in online education. In particular, pages 176-178 were helpful in formulating my ideas for this section of the paper.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Bloomington, IN and London: Indiana University Press, 1967), Page 1.304 (VII.2 B 89) 657.

¹⁶ *Two Ages*, 97. Although he does not make direct mention to it here, an individual living within the aesthetic sphere would certainly fit into Kierkegaard's description in the following passage: “by knowing and being everything possible to be in contradiction to oneself, that is, to be nothing at all.” For more see 104-105 Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age,” *Kierkegaard Studies* (1999): 96-109.

¹⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 131.

¹⁸ *Two Ages*, 97.

the belief that communication in the mediated world gives a false sense of connection and to allow mediated connections to interfere with face-to-face connections is self-deceiving.¹⁹

In his journals, Kierkegaard addresses the issue of mental depression which he states is the result of "unrest and fermentation."²⁰ He does not feel that this should be treated by encouraging more activity because that is precisely the cause of the depression, rather he turns to nature for a solution.

I venture to suggest a closer relationship to nature...For what is as recreating as watching migratory birds: this apparent lack of any laws and yet a perfect law. Even watching the stars and their measured course across the sky must, especially in this connection, be acknowledged as a significant remedy for the depression of our age.²¹

By applying this to the depression caused by MMT, we can achieve the alone time necessary to fully consider our communication. This is also conducive to Kierkegaard's ideal of the communication of capability.²²

The Inescapability of Mobile-Mediated Technology

Knowing the inherent dangers of MMT, we may choose to avoid it altogether. Although an option for some, most of society would see that choice as unrealistic. Despite the negative side effects that accompany it, we realistically cannot ignore the technology. MMT allows connections negating distance and time. When in-person contact is not possible, we can remain

¹⁹ *Journals and Papers*, Page 1.306 (VII.2 B 89) 657.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Page Break 5.265, 5761.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.265 (VI B 222), 5761.

²² It is worth noting that for Kierkegaard, experiencing nature would not be the ultimate answer to our depression and despair. He stresses that all forms life in the aesthetic sphere lead to despair and we can only find contentment through faith in God and embracing the religious sphere. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings XIX: The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition For Upbuilding And Awakening*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 38-41.

in touch with those we care about. Although MMT may be less than ideal, it is preferable to no communication at all and has become a perceived necessity. Constant connection, as well as access to infinite information are conveniences which we would be foolish to ignore.

MMT has become an integral part of living in the modern age. It is difficult to imagine holding a job, maintaining relationships and living day to day without embracing at least some form of MMT. Therefore we must concede that it is a part of human existence that is here to stay, regardless of any negative side effects. I will now address how we moderate our relationship with mobile mediated technology.

Kierkegaard and *Friluftsliv*

I have established that MMT has harmful side effects which denigrate the quality of face-to-face communication, distorts how we view each other, and ultimately leads to despair. To curb this I offered a solution in Kierkegaard's closer relationship with nature. Although this is a plausible solution, the fact that we cannot escape a world of MMT questions whether such attempts can be realized by achieving the solitude that we need. In response I will now draw parallels between the Scandinavian ecophilosophy of *friluftsliv* and Kierkegaard's views on nature.

Friluftsliv, which roughly translates to "open air life," emphasizes a regular connection with nature to bring about a higher level of awareness.²³ At its core is the belief that identification with nature and embracing the natural rhythms of the world are integral to our

²³ Hans Gelter, "Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian Philosophy of Outdoor Life," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, no. 5 (Summer 2000): 78.

existence. Most of us look at nature as being outside of our day-to-day lives. We see nature as foreign, when we should see it as our origin. Within a relatively short time in the history of humankind, we have abandoned our "home through the ages."²⁴ The practice of *friluftsliv* is intended to help us regain that relationship in a simple and approachable way.

Friluftsliv discourages the use of any equipment which would take the focus away from a view of nature as an intrinsic value.²⁵ If we need a reason or activity to spend time in nature, that reason often becomes our focus rather than nature itself.²⁶ This also encourages the participation of those who cannot afford equipment. The practice of *friluftsliv* is intended to be simple. The tradition in Norway involves walking either alone or with others in nature. Børge Dahle discusses the motives for the walks as varying from person to person, but generally speaking the goal is experiencing nature, socializing and exerting physical activity.²⁷ As opposed to the largely American practice of going to designated locations such as parks for outdoor recreation, Norway encourages a free and open experience of the land through the implementation of "*Allemannsrett*."²⁸ This allows for open access to uncultivated land regardless of ownership.

The unbridled time in nature encouraged by *friluftsliv* closely parallels Kierkegaard's views of nature as a remedy for despair. Peter Reed and David Rothenberg stress that an "empathetic identification with our home environment" and a sense of place are integrally linked

²⁴ Faarlund, 56-57.

²⁵ 30-31. Børge Dahle, "Norwegian Friluftsliv: A Lifelong Communal Process," in *Nature First: outdoor life the friluftsliv way*, eds. Bob Henderson and Nils Vikander, 23-36 (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2007).

²⁶ 39-41. Hans Gelter, "Friluftsliv as Slow Experiences in a Post-modern "experience" Society," in *Nature First: outdoor life the friluftsliv way*, eds. Bob Henderson and Nils Vikander, 37-46 (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2007).

²⁷ Dahle, 23.

²⁸ "*Allemannsrett*" roughly translates as all persons' rights., 75. Odd Gåsdal, "Norwegians and Friluftsliv: Are we unique?," in *Nature First: outdoor life the Friluftsliv way*, eds. Bob Henderson and Nils Vikander, 75-82, (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2007).

to self-realization.²⁹ If the causes of our MMT-inflicted depression are ultimately less than genuine connections with others and ourselves, as well as a lack of solitude, then in *friluftsliv* we have a viable solution.

In related statements on the recreating and healing qualities of a closer relationship with nature, Kierkegaard echoes the manner of *friluftsliv* by speaking of the curative properties of walking. In a letter to his sister-in-law Jette, he wrote the following:

Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it. Even if one were to walk for one's health and it were constantly one station ahead – I would still say: Walk!³⁰

The need to escape the hustle of city life to the solitude of nature was a notion that Kierkegaard embraced.³¹ This took the shape of learning from nature and generally took on a tone of religious reassurance. It is nevertheless relevant to our discussion. The motif of the lily and the bird used throughout Kierkegaard's works shows his belief in learning through observing nature.³² Another point which closely mirrors the practice of *friluftsliv* is becoming more content with our common humanity through contemplating the creatures we encounter.³³ Possessiveness is central to Kierkegaard's thoughts on the birds' teachings. As Leo Stan states: "a mere upward look at birds should effect an instant blindness to any primal anxiety. The birds' self-contentment is able to

²⁹ 155. Peter Reed and David Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the open air: the Norwegian roots of deep ecology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)., It naturally follows that in empathizing with nature as our home environment we also take a stand for environmental protection.

³⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, XXV: Letters and Documents*, trans. Henrik Rosenmeier, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 214-215. 150.

³¹ 56. George Pattison, "Kierkegaard and Copenhagen" in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, eds. John Lippitt and George Pattison, 44-61. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³² Much can be said of the deep religious themes he draws from the lily and the bird. For a developed paper on the topic see: Leo Stan, "The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air: An Endless Liturgy in Kierkegaard's Authorship," in *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources: Volume 1, Tome II: Kierkegaard and the Bible - The New Testament*, eds. Lee C. Barrett and Jon Stewart, 55-76, (Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010).

³³ *Ibid.*, 58.

cure us of the very root of such apprehensions: possessiveness."³⁴ The anxieties created by thinking about the inequalities perpetuated by the status quos of society are nullified by observing those without such worries; plants and animals.³⁵ *Friluftsliv*, in embracing nature for its intrinsic value, reflects the thought that outside of our post-modern society, a genuine experience in free nature unifies us in our common humanity.

What I propose as a solution to our state of deficient communication and despair is a buffering of MMT through a relationship with free nature. As I previously stated, to avoid technology altogether is not a viable option. Instead, we must find instead a healthy way of regularly disconnecting from it. This disconnection can be achieved through a regular practice of *friluftsliv*. Kierkegaard would likely reiterate that reflection is a concern even when considering our experience of nature as a cure. To overthink the answers to our dilemma, would lead us away from a genuine experience. As Reed and Rothenberg state: "there is a deep philosophy in woods, mountains, and water, a philosophy only first hand meetings with nature can intimate."³⁶ We can read, discuss and ponder the notion of how to achieve *friluftsliv* as much as we want, but in the end we must simply experience it for ourselves.

³⁴ Stan, 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁶ Reed and Rothenberg, 155.

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